

A World Free of Nuclear Weapons?

**On Why Confidence and Institutions
are Key to Nuclear Disarmament.**

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Introduction

Ever since United States (U.S.) President Barack Obama's speech in Prague on April 5 2009, there has been growing attention to the topic of nuclear disarmament throughout mass media. The foundations for his speech, however, were set by an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal by four elder U.S. statesmen: Schultz et al. (2007) drew the academic community's attention to a renewed vision of A WORLD FREE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS. The article's impact waves have since rippled through numerous institutes and think-tanks to give birth to a number of publications debating GLOBAL ZERO. Governments seem to have been caught up in this vision, as can be seen from the 6 ATTAINABLE STEPS for an eventual ban on nuclear weapons by the BRITISH FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE (see Cole 2009) or JAPAN'S MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS HIROFUMI NAKASONE's (2009b) 11 BENCHMARKS to accomplish global nuclear disarmament.

This is not a primer of nuclear disarmament though. The Acheson-Lilientahl plan under the Truman administration would have internationalized control over fissile material as soon as 1946 but was rejected by the Soviet Union (compare Scoblic 2008). Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev set things in motion in Reykjavik in 1986 (Barry 2008), but nuclear abolition was thwarted by Reagan's insisting on the STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE (SDI).

What is it that made Schultz et al. (2007) ask anew: "What will it take to rekindle the vision shared by Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev?" Why are scholars in- and outside governments again pledging for nuclear disarmament? The weakened role of nation-states and the growing influence of non-state entities and networks (USIP 2008) have shifted focus from deterrence to nuclear terrorism:

"It should be evident that retaining nuclear weapons is unnecessary and not helpful for pre-empting, deterring or retaliating against nuclear terrorism. The most effective way to prevent nuclear terrorism is to ensure that fissile materials or nuclear weapons cannot be obtained by terrorist organisations." (see Perkovich and Acton 2009, 38)

The question that begs to be asked is whether global nuclear disarmament is feasible. Under which circumstances would it be possible to wipe all nuclear weapons from the face of earth, what requirements would have to be fulfilled in order to guarantee global zero?

In the remainder of this text, I will argue that, under *realist* premises, complete and comprehensive global zero is unattainable. By limiting our view to states' security interests and their perceived threats, total nuclear disarmament will remain an utopian and even impossible outcome.

In order to escape arms control dilemmas and attain a, in constructivist terms, *viable* solution, institutions will have to be reformed and norms created. The possibility of a world free of nuclear weapons needs to be considered under *social-constructivist* premises. Realist theories would have us remain in a vicious circle of power balancing and extended deterrence and cannot sufficiently explain what role norms, expectations and perceptions play in a state's (un-)willingness to disarm.

I will pursue this hypothesis by highlighting some distinct points along the way: First, the prominent debate on verification will become inextricably complicated if focus isn't shifted from the technical details to epistemological interpretations of the basic requirements of a nuclear disarmament regime. I will try to illustrate that point by giving some insight into this debate and its conundrums. I will continue by analyzing if confidence can be built by seriously addressing existing or planned treaties that haven't yet come into force, like the COMPREHENSIVE TEST BAN TREATY (CTBT) or the FISSILE MATERIAL CUT-OFF TREATY (FMCT). Third, by comparing considerations on threats and power balancing to long-term creation of norms by international institutions, I will show that these institutions will have to be reformed in order to overcome their current deadlocks and become effective. Finally, and strongly related to the issue of missing authority, I will try to illustrate why nuclear disarmament cannot be achieved without some form of conventional arms control. If GLOBAL ZERO is to be reached, conventional weapons can no longer be seen as a completely distinct matter.

This text will focus on the demand side of nuclear proliferation, because that perspective is most closely related to how states perceive threats in the international system. While some scholars (see Gartzke and Kroenig 2009, 152,157) suggest that "understanding which states are able to get" nuclear weapons delivers the best explanation of nuclear proliferation, discussing the possibility of a world free of nuclear weapons needs to focus on *why* states want them.

Confidence and Institutions

Verification and Enforcement, Transparency and Faith

No nuclear weapon state would agree to relinquish its warheads unless it'd be certain that it wasn't acting unilaterally and that other states either disarm just like it does or refrain from obtaining nuclear weapons in the first place. Perkovich and Acton (2009, 13) consider what security conditions, what measures would be required in order to verify and enforce nuclear disarmament. To go into more detail with Hiemann and Thränert (2008):

“How can states be prevented from secretly engaging in nuclear re-armament (especially since the discovery of their programmes could trigger arms races and make the use of nuclear weapons more likely than today)? What should be done with those states that cheat?”

Among a plethora of arguments, these two should serve as introduction into the debate on verifiability of nuclear disarmament:

1. Nuclear weapons cannot be un-invented.
2. Compliance cannot be verified and cheating cannot be detected. (compare Goldblat N.d.)

While it is quite right that “no human creation can be disinvented” (Perkovich and Acton 2009, 17), “nuclear technology can be contained, just as the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFC) that pollute the Ozone Layer has been significantly curtailed worldwide.” (USIP 2008) As Zhenqiang (2009, 259) explains, the international community needs to adopt a new *vision* that de-legitimizes nuclear weapons by regarding them as the equivalent of chemical and biological weapons and thus effectively banning their use.

The second issue is more complicated. While some scholars (i.e. Goldblat N.d.) argue that “full *transparency* and sophisticated technical means of supervision [emphasis D.R.]” could render the probability of nuclear disarmament treaty violation relatively small, others acknowledge that verification is not designed to detect arbitrarily small violations (Perkovich and Acton 2009, 50) or that, while one can keep track of installations and material flows, one cannot, however, ascertain initial inventories or find hidden objects (May 2008). “Even if all nuclear weapons are eliminated”, writes May (2008), “more can be built with existing materials and facilities, or with new ones.” Hirofumi Nakasone's (2009a)

response to that argument would be that nuclear disarmament measures can be irreversible if all nuclear warheads, testing sites and facilities capable of producing fissile material would be dismantled. Considering this deuce, but quoting May (2008) on the issue of verifiable compliance, the elimination of nuclear weapons “has to be *taken on faith* [emphasis D.R.]”.

While it may or may not be possible to ultimately verify total compliance to nuclear disarmament, cheating will always remain an option. To simplify considerably, the single solution to keep states from cheating would be to make that act, among the international community as well as domestically, morally objectionable. In the end, verification depends on certain key issues highlighted in the course of the above paragraphs: a *vision*, *transparency* and *faith* and thus ultimately on the genesis of new international norms.

Perkovich and Acton (2009, 49) posit that verification helps to build confidence, but isn't confidence equally required to allow for heightened level of transparency and thus effective means of verification? Transparency, in particular, is not a suitable option for China, which has a relatively small number of nuclear weapons in comparison to the U.S. or Russia. Secrecy about the location of its nuclear weapons, even while gradually dismantling them, is imperative for Chinese security, unless it has a relationship of mutual deterrence with its adversaries (Perkovich and Acton 2009, 40). While its “value [...] as a tool of the disarmament process would grow”, transparency would become increasingly dangerous with every dismantled nuclear warhead (Perkovich and Acton 2009). In the case of China - while similar cases apply to India and Pakistan - verification can only be fulfilled by building confidence, which, in turn, must be achieved through conflict resolution (Perkovich and Acton 2009, 41).

The role of verification in the course of time also seems to be quite disputed. Whereas Perkovich and Acton (2009, 51) hope that states will become increasingly convinced of other states' sincerity and their resolve not to cheat and therefore no longer require absolutely robust verification, Nakasone (2009a) implies that increasingly accurate verification of the nuclear dismantlement will become necessary as the reduction of nuclear arsenals proceeds.

The solution seems to lie in both, building confidence among the members of the international community to allow for stringent verification and build effective norms and institutions to keep states from perceiving cheating as a viable option. It remains to be seen by what means such confidence can be established.

Building Confidence, Shedding Distrust

Among the many steps detailed in Schultz et al. 2007 or in the BRITISH FOREIGN OFFICE's report (see Cole 2009), an important way of increasing confidence between members of the international community seems to be for all states to sign and ratify the CTBT. Although Harrison (2006, 6) states that both the CTBT and the FMCT are inequitable treaties - as is the NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY (NPT) - and that they would "freeze the existing imbalances in the global nuclear power structure", taking action on these issues will be required to regain non-nuclear weapon states' trust. According to Schultz et al. (2007), "non-nuclear weapon states have grown increasingly skeptical on the sincerity of the nuclear powers." Understandably, they have begun to "dig in their heels against seemingly sensible new ideas" (*What to do with a vision of zero* 2008), such as the FMCT or a nuclear fuel bank under international control. The inequitable condition of current treaties has made non-nuclear weapon states "[...] see restrictions on their nuclear freedom as another form of nuclear apartheid." (*What to do with a vision of zero* 2008) Indeed, "[...] as long as the nuclear weapons states claim to be exempted from the NPT requirement to negotiate in good faith on nuclear disarmament, the nuclear danger will only increase." (Barry 2008)

Written in 2006, the following quote does not give a fully adequate account of the current situation under President Obama, but one has to consider that feelings of distrust are not easily wiped away in a matter of months when they have been nurtured for years:

"Why should other countries forswear the nuclear option if the existing nuclear powers are upgrading their nuclear weapons, talk openly of using them in future wars, and no longer give even lip service to the goal of phasing out nuclear armament that was enshrined in Article Six of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)?" (Harrison 2006, 1)

Once again, the task of building confidence seems to be falling into the hands of an international institution. The UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE (USIP) (2008) suggests that the United Nations Organization (UN) should monitor countries' compliance to zero nuclear weapons in order to do away with the "hypocrisy" of the U.S. holding nuclear weapons "while asking other states to discard them." (USIP 2008) USIP would also like to lay the task of creating a bank of weapons-grade materials to quench worldwide hunger for nuclear

energy into the UN's capable hands, but as we'll discuss in the following section, it remains to be seen if indeed, the UN is capable of handling such responsibility.

One could argue that, for non-nuclear weapons states, the step from the NPT to GLOBAL ZERO would barely make a difference, because they wouldn't need to disarm. Though, in order to guarantee a nuclear weapons free world, the idea of an internationalized nuclear fuel bank is of fundamental importance, which leads Hiemann and Thränert (2008) to argue that "many newly industrialised countries and developing countries are, however, opposed to seeing the unconstrained right to civil nuclear energy as laid down by the NPT annulled."

As we have seen, several scholars would like to see the UN act as both verifier of nuclear disarmament compliance and administrator of a nuclear fuel bank. But can it stand up to these expectations?

Institutional Norm Building

While the NPT regime seems to be strong enough to mark potentially new nuclear states such as North Korea and Iran as *rogue states* (Sagan 1997, 81), there seems to be unaltered international prestige and grandeur attached to the possession of nuclear weapons (Walker 2009, 20). Countries, such as France and the United Kingdom (UK), still prize their nuclear weapons as "[...] potent symbols of [their] identity and status as a great power" (Sagan 1997, 79). Others, such as Iran and North Korea may very well be trying to get their hands on nuclear weapons in order to get into an equivalent position.

Just as nuclear weapons have determined what is desirable or necessary in order to be of good standing, they have also shaped security guarantees through extended deterrence for over 60 years. It should therefore not come as a surprise that Foreign Affairs Minister Hirofumi Nakasone considers the U.S. NUCLEAR UMBRELLA as vital to Japan's regional security: "It goes without saying that the current international security environment [...] requires nuclear deterrence." (Nakasone 2009b) However, the situation has changed considerably since the end of the COLD WAR:

"The danger now is not one of a first strike by a rival superpower. The contemporary threat comes from proliferation, from the insecurity of existing stockpiles, and from the ambitions of international terrorists. The old doctrine of deterrence has limited utility." (Stephens 2009)

Nevertheless, in a world that still heavily relies on the U.S. nuclear umbrella, pushing too hard for disarmament could have a destabilizing effect on security (compare *What to do with a vision of zero* 2008). This implies that disarmament cannot occur without the *re-construction* of international norms, such as the desirability of nuclear deterrence. Even multilateral, synchronous disarmament will probably not reduce the century-old distrust between China and Japan, which in and of itself has become an institution. Regional security seems indeed to be of quite some relevance. Hiemann and Thränert (see 2008) as well as Harrison (compare 2006, 2) point out that proliferation would continue independently of complete nuclear abolition, “not because Washington and Moscow have made insufficient effort to disarm” (Hiemann and Thränert 2008), but “because [non-nuclear weapon states D.R.] face real or perceived threats to their security from global or regional adversaries.” (Harrison 2006, 2) Hiemann and Thränert (2008) thus point out this very fundamental key question:

“Is the elimination of nuclear weapons a pre-condition for a peaceful world order, or must (above all regional) conflicts be solved before a world free of those weapons can be achieved?”

Short of making world peace a *sine qua non* of nuclear disarmament, Perkovich and Acton (2009, 21) point out that states can feel less threatened over time, if former adversaries continuously demonstrate that they have no interest in and no advantage from attacking. As they further elaborate by quoting the Australian CANBERRA COMMISSION ON THE ELIMINATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS on the effects of time on crafting institutional norms, “[t]he stability of a nuclear weapon free regime may depend [...] on the normative force of the prohibition of acquiring nuclear weapons that would grow as the regime was institutionalized and endured.” (as cited in Perkovich and Acton 2009, 100)

Similarly, states will only begin making changes necessary for nuclear disarmament, Perkovich and Acton (see 2009, 18) argue, when they share the belief that the goal is realistic. Put into practice, this could mean that the remaining nuclear weapon states would become involved as soon as the reductions of the leading states reaches a critical level (compare Schultz et al. 2008). Moral pressure on France, China India and Pakistan would undeniably increase, once their stockpiles exceeded those of nations they’re looking up to or presumably protect against. In stark contrast to the current situation, nuclear proliferators “would be breaking a truly global anti-nuclear-weapons norm, rather than seeking to join a handful of nuclear-weapons possessors in a divided,

inequitable nuclear order of 'haves' and 'have-nots'." (Perkovich and Acton 2009, 46)

Still, this means that the norm would need to be created by a body capable of instituting, verifying and enforcing such prohibitions and giving it a legitimacy that would be recognized and respected by the international community. Although it has been suggested repeatedly that the UN and its Security Council (UN-SC) watch over nuclear disarmament, they are, by definition, not eligible for that task. One of the reasons why India went nuclear, its seeking of a shortcut to great-power status, to becoming a permanent member of the UN-SC (Tertrais 2009, 182), is a prime illustration of the fundamental flaw vis-à-vis nuclear abolition inherent in that institution. How can an institution that rewards nuclear weapons with permanent UN-SC membership and veto rights be expected to promote and enforce nuclear disarmament? Also, the 5 de jure nuclear weapons states (P5), as the UN's norm entrepreneurs, would almost certainly veto the setup of a nuclear prohibition, should they fear a loss of influence.

Although Perkovich and Acton (2009, 89) seem convinced that the UN Security Council would be willing to act more rapidly "in the event of a serious violation", if multilateral nuclear disarmament were globally agreed upon, May (see 2008) doubts that the UN could prevent a race to rearm and that it "could [...] act in a timely manner to stop opposing sides from obtaining nuclear weapons". Stressing his point, he reminds us that the Security Council's record in such cases is poor, which leads him to his final argument that "[t]he state of international relations is not such as to verifiably and irreversibly support [nuclear disarmament D.R.]" (May 2008)

Thus, to make the UN-SC into a nuclear abolition watchdog, "[...] serious reform of the United Nations Security Council may be needed [...]" (Tertrais 2009, 182), including the permanent members giving up their veto rights. Only then would a call for nuclear disarmament become authentic and permanent UN-SC membership for Japan, Germany and India could even be made "conditional upon the maintenance of non-nuclear status under the NPT [which] might further remove nuclear weapons possession from considerations of international prestige." (Sagan 1997, 84)

The Conventional Weapons Dilemma

As hinted at in the previous sections, nuclear disarmament devoid of norm institution would not do away with power balancing in the international system.

The opposite could be the case, for some states' conventional military power might create an even higher imbalance in a world without nuclear deterrence. The conventional weapons dilemma is adequately described by Goldblat (N.d.):

“Given the inequalities of states in conventional armaments, a problem would then [low levels of nuclear forces D.R.] arise as to how to proceed to the final elimination of nuclear weapons, for nuclear forces, even relatively small forces, are considered by some nations as a counterbalance to the superior conventional forces of their adversaries. A fully equitable solution to this dilemma might require the abolition of conventional weapons as well. Resuscitating the utopian idea of a general and complete disarmament, however, would lead nowhere.”

Yet again, the example of U.S. and Chinese security relations serves as a perfect illustration. Before significant progress toward nuclear disarmament could be made, the U.S. would have to convince China that its relative power would not increase under the abolition of nuclear weapons (Perkovich and Acton 2009, 30). It “would have to display a willingness to eschew unilateral or small-coalition military interventions [...]” (Perkovich and Acton 2009, 31) and exercise greater constraint in its use of conventional forces. Eventually, in order to escape this dilemma, the U.S. would not only have to abolish nuclear weapons, but also engage in conventional arms control (Walker 2009, 13). Should the U.S. fail to comply to these requirements, a new conventional arms race to balance its conventional power could ensue. It is eye-opening to realize with Scoblic (2008) “that the asymmetric power of nuclear weapons means that [the U.S.] are more likely to be deterred by rogue-state nuclear weapons than the other way around.”

Conclusion

As Perkovich and Acton (2009) explain at several occasions, we mustn't say that nuclear disarmament is an impossible task and consequently halt all further debate on the issue. A first goal would be to get towards a *viable* solution, namely low numbers of nuclear weapons, all the while maintaining a rigid non-proliferation regime and preventing a conventional arms race. When the global number of nuclear warheads will have reached a near zero level, the international community's interrelationships will most probably have changed considerably and may either pose new challenges to further nuclear

disarmament or, as we can only hope, make the current discussion on technical verification details look exaggerated.

One of the steps detailed by Schultz et al. (2007) that must be fulfilled in order to make a nuclear weapons free world possible, is to resolve regional confrontations and conflicts that give rise to new nuclear powers. As we have discussed in some of the sections above, squashing regional conflicts is absolutely necessary to create one of the key requirements for global zero to become reachable: confidence.

Moreover, we have seen that nuclear disarmament must become desirable and thus a norm of the international community in order to keep states from considering cheating as a viable and fruitful alternative to abolishing their nuclear capabilities. It is therefore important to note that, even if the goal of global zero seems to unreachable under the current circumstances, “[...] invoking the idea [of nuclear disarmament] has political value if it embeds in global consciousness an understanding of the direction in which policies and actions should move.” (Walker 2009, 16)

Perkovich and Acton (2009, 23) further raise our attention to some of Walker’s conceptions, most importantly, that nuclear disarmament can only be “a ‘co-evolutionary’ process of step-by-step progress”, meaning that arms-reduction and non-proliferation measures will change according to the momentary political and security environments and in turn, influence those environments. Furthermore, I have explained why the UN-SC cannot be guardian over nuclear disarmament. I strongly agree with Zedillo (2009, 291), who feels “[...] convinced that failure to accomplish veto reform would leave the abolition process in a dead end.”

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